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CLASSICAL MUSIC

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The Calder Quartet excelled in its challenging, esoteric repertoire at the Barns at Wolf Trap on Friday night. (Wolf Trap)

Calder Quartet

There's little that's typical in a typical performance by the Calder Quartet. This ensemble pushes the audience's boundaries, and sometimes its buttons. Friday night at the Barns at Wolf Trap, the players -- violinists Benjamin Jacobson and Andrew Bulbrook, violist Jonathan Moerschel and cellist Eric Byers -- probably included Mendelssohn's Capriccio, Op. 81, No. 3, just to show they could handle standard repertoire. Although the piece is actually a bit unusual -- featuring a fugue, that most uncapricious of forms -- the quartet gave it a straightforward, rather dry interpretation.

But like the mobiles of the visual artist from whom the quartet takes its name, the group shifts its emphasis and focus from moment to moment. Bartok's String Quartet No. 5 was revelatory, with quicksilver mood swings and fast-changing rhythms, especially in the central "Scherzo alla Bulgarese." Written in 1934, this piece still sounds strikingly modern, with its constantly shifting tonality and multiplicity of bowing techniques. The players adeptly handled synchronized ricochets, four-instrument trills and pizzicati, and the rough humor of the finale.

If the Bartok was a storm-tossed mobile, Anton Batagov's "Quartet.ru" was closer to a stabile. The world premiere of this work, commissioned by Wolf Trap, revealed an overarching sense of vast expansiveness -- a sort of sonic drone, containing oft-repeated rhythmic fragments. It was played very cleanly, almost without vibrato, and often seemed to be all accompaniment -- a work more of mood than of progression.

The concert was only moderately well attended, showing that difficult and unfamiliar music may still be left, like a Calder mobile, to twist in the wind.